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ABSTRACT

One of the major deficiencies of the recent educational reports calling for educational reform is the failure to suggest ways of using the federal role to meet the national interest. Seven dimensions of national social, economic, and political commitment that are linked to education are: (1) expansion of equality of opportunities for the disadvantaged, handicapped, and minorities; (2) promotion of economic growth and full employment; (3) minimization of spillover costs among states and regions; (4) maintaining cultural and scientific progress; (5) ensuring an effectively functioning democracy; (6) defense of the nation; and (7) educational research and development. Under federalism the responsibilities of government are divided and the federal government can only influence educational policy indirectly. However, there are four policy levers that the federal government can use to meet national educational concerns: leadership, educational services, grants-in-aid, and litigation. (MLF)

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A CHALLENGE FOR ACTION

National Leadership & Involvement in Education

By Henry M. Levin

In 1983 at least a dozen reports were issued by national commissions and study groups calling for specific reforms of elementary and secondary schools in the U.S. Like the rash of educational reports that followed the launching of Sputnik in 1958, these have sought far-reaching reforms in teaching, curriculum, and educational accountability. However, unlike the post-Sputnik recommendations, the purported role of the federal government is either minimized or ignored.

In that earlier period, the calls for reform by James Conant, Admiral Hyman Rickover, and various educational constituencies led to a period of federal involvement and leadership. The federal government took an active role in the development of new curricula in science and mathematics and the retraining of teachers in these areas, in the development and finance of new teacher training programs and scholarships for teacher candidates in selected fields, in desegregating the schools, and in providing grants to improve the education of disadvantaged, handicapped, and bilingual youngsters.

Although the present reports have a similar zeal for reform, most refrain from discussing any federal involvement. The lack of direct federal action in the proposed reforms is especially conspicuous, given the national focus of educational concerns. That is, the reports argue that present educational policies and practices threaten to undermine the competitive position of the U.S. in the world order with deleterious effects on jobs, income, prestige, and military power.

The federal role in education has always been an uneasy one. In sharp contrast with most of the industrialized countries, the elementary and secondary schools of America are not under the control of a central authority at the national level. Rather, they are governed by 50 states and about 15,000 local educational agencies. The advantage of this arrangement is that schools can be highly responsive to the regional and local needs of their clientele since educational practices can be determined on a state and local basis rather than a national one. The disadvantage of this arrangement is that there is no straightforward mechanism to address national concerns in education.

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The rationale for such an arrangement is clear. Under federalism the responsibilities of government are divided so that the central government undertakes the provision of public services of a national nature (e.g. defense), while state and local entities undertake those that impact primarily on their residents. The U.S. Constitution enshrines this principle in the Tenth Amendment by stating that all powers not delegated to the central government nor forbidden to the states, "are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."

Historical Background

In the early days of the republic, formal schooling was not required for most employment or for political participation. Most of the labor force was self-employed in agriculture, commerce, and artisan production. Only those in the learned professions needed schooling. Political issues were straightforward in nature so that citizens could be educated about both the issues and their political roles through informal discourse and community meetings. The local focus of most potitical matters meant that one did not need great knowledge of abstract principles to understand them.

Further, the nation was not yet knit together into a highly interdependent, national system of commerce that would require citizens to speak a common language and accept a uniform system of work organization and production. Literacy could be attained through religious or family instruction, mechanic's institutes, with the Dame Schools representing a popular method of inculcating basic reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. Such schools consisted typically of a mother

EA 016 335

instructing her own children and those of her neighbors around a kitchen table.

As the nation grew in size and population, and became more industrialized, formal education grew in importance. Schooling became requisite for job preparation, for political participation in an expanding and increasingly complex national arena, and for integrating the large waves of immigrants arriving on American shores in the 19th century. By the beginning of the 20th century, the national implications of education became more obvious as rural migrants with little education began to flow to urban areas without the requisite job skills to participate fully in an urban economy. And by the 1950s, the pressures began to mount for the federal government to take a major role in addressing national concerns in education that were not adequately met at state and local levels.

The National Interest in Education

There are at least seven broad dimensions of national social, economic, and political commitment that are linked to education. These are: (1) expansion of equality of opportunities for the disadvantaged, handicapped, and minorities; (2) promotion of economic growth and full employment; (3) minimization of spillover costs among states and regions; (4) maintaining cultural and scientific progress; (5) ensuring an effectively functioning democracy; (6) defense of the nation; and (7) educational research and development.

1. Equality of Opportunity

In a society that prides itself on providing opportunities for all, education represents a primary means for gaining access to jobs and for participating in major social and political institutions. However citizens from minority and low income backgrounds and those with physical and mental handicaps have not had the same opportunities as other citizens, in part, because of discrimination, and in part, because they may lack the skills of their more advantaged peers. Without the skills and knowledge which are prerequisites for greater social, political, and economic participation, these groups have only limited access to employment, occupational advancement, political participation and other aspects of American life. There must be a powerful social intervention to improve the chances for those born into less fortunate circumstances.

The national concern for equity is that of redressing "undeserved" inequalities. Clearly education is considered to be the major social intervention for assuring better opportunities for these groups. As a national policy there is a commitment to expanding their social, political, and economic prospects by providing them with compensatory educational resources and a more appropriate education than would be received in the absence of strong federal commitment. In particular, federal programs for compensatory education, bilingual education, and education of the handicapped represent programs which address the need for greater national equity in access to overall social, economic, and political opportunities.

2. Economic Growth and Full Employment

Economic growth and full employment are important objectives for the nation because they contribute to a rising standard of living and participation in that growing economic activity by all who are able and wish to engage in productive employment. Both economic growth and full employment are based upon the fullest use of national resources, a goal reflected explicitly in the Employment Act of 1946.

While these goals cannot be met through educational policy alone, a national educational strategy is a crucial ingredient for success. Economic growth requires the availability of the appropriate types of trained labor in the necessary quantities, and full employment requires that all adults who wish to work have the types of skills for which there is a job demand. Thus, educational policy for economic growth and full employment has stressed the national implementation of vocational education and manpower training, improving scientific and technical knowledge, dropout prevention, and minimum competencies in basic skills such as reading. The federal government has sponsored a wide variety of funding programs to state and local educational agencies for addressing these goals.

3. Minimizing Spillover Costs

In a society in which citizens can move freely across state borders, the education of students in one part of the country can have important consequences for other regions. For example, the products of a poor educational system in the rural South often migrate to Northern cities in search of employment and opportunity. Many of these migrants have been unable to obtain gainful employment because of deficiencies in their educational backgrounds. The result is that some have required public assistance to survive, while others have pursued illegal activities. Thus, the social costs imposed by an inadequate education in one region can "spillover" into another region in the form of rising costs of crime and public assistance.

There is a national interest in minimizing such spillover costs by promoting educational programs that will educate adequately all citizens. Certainly, federal programs that provide compensatory resources for the education of disadvantaged and minority students are partially designed to address this national interest. By promoting adequate educational opportunities at the initial place of residence, later spillover costs can be avoided.

4. Cultural and Scientific Progress

The nation has much to gain from maintaining levels of cultural and scientific progress that contribute to an increased standard of living, a leading position in the world commerce, international prestige, and an appropriate national defense. In particular, scientific and technical knowledge and applications are the basis for reducing costs of production and developing new products through innovation and rising productivity. Cultural advance enables the nation to enhance the lives of its citizens and share contributions in the arts and humanities with other nations, as well as building a national identity and an international basis for greater understanding and harmony.

This national concern is addressed largely through the promotion of developments in science and the arts and their educational extensions. Especially important in this regard are the programs of the National Science Foundation and the National Endowments for the Humanities and Arts as well as the subsidies for national educational radio and television. Support under the programs of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 in foreign languages, science, and mathematics have also supported these goals. Finally, all of the federal programs for improving educational equity have contributed to the broad goal of scientific and cultural progress by making it possible to identify and develop latent talent that would otherwise be lost.

5. Democratic Political Participation

The promotion of democratic processes and participation depends heavily upon the acceptance of a common set of values and institutions. This is a particularly crucial goal for educating persons from immigrant backgrounds, but it applies to all members of society. The ability to understand major political issues, to exercise the rights to free speech and

association, to accept a political or legal process to adjudicate conflict or difference are examples of the type of knowledge required in a democratic society. Citizens are not born with democratic values and knowledge of how to participate in democratic institutions. This behavior is largely learned through both formal education and the process of political participation itself. Research has especially pointed to the central role of schools in preparing the young for participation in democratic institutions.

The national concern for promoting education for democracy has been closely identified with the attempt to improve the educational participation of racial and linguistic minorities. This justification has been responsible for much of the legal and legislative impetus to reduce racial segregation and improve English proficiencies of linguistic minorities. In addition, federal initiatives for improving access to educational opportunities among disadvantaged, handicapped, and female students are partially motivated by the national goal of promoting full and democratic participation by these groups in the political and social life of the nation.

6. Defense of the Nation

The defense of the nation requires not only economic and technological strength, but also a reliable military force with strong commitment. Citizens must possess the proper skills and the patriotic zeal to contribute to national defense. The educational system is an important influence for protecting American values and institutions. Emblematic of the federal efforts in using education to attain these goals was the National Defense Education Act of 1958 with its emphasis on preparedness in foreign languages, science, and mathematics.

7. Educational Research and Information

A final area of national concern is that of advancing and improving educational practice and the collection and publication of information on the educational sector. The improvement of educational practice refers to using educational resources more efficiently and meeting eduational needs more effectively. Such a goal demands a research and development effort in which the various challenges of education are studied systematically, and proposed solutions are developed and tested. Most educational problems are not confined to school district or state boundaries, but are national or, at least, regional in scope. Indeed, this has been recognized in the national calls for educational reform, where the major challenges are viewed as ones that pervade all or most of the schools of the nation.

It would be highly inefficient for 50 states and thousands of school districts to undertake independent research and development efforts. Such an endeavor would clearly represent an inefficient use of resources because of the duplication of efforts. In addition most of the states and local districts lack the resources and incentives to carry out a substantial research and development program of national scope. The federal government has the resource capacity to undertake such an activity and to communicate findings to all of the states and their local schools. Likewise, the collection of information on enrollments, expenditures, and other aspects of the educational sector can only be undertaken at a national level if data are to be collected and disseminated in a comparable form and efficient manner.

Responding to National Concerns

These seven areas represent major dimensions of national educational concern. However, a central issue remains the question of why they require federal intervention. That is, why don't the independent actions of state and local school authorities also take account of national goals? But, national concerns are not always taken into account by state and local policies.

Under a federalism, decisionmaking authority is delegated to governmental units that are as close as possible to the populations that are affected by the decisions. If federal, state, and local priorities were to coincide precisely, than what is good for state and local populations should also be good for the nation. For example, the objectives of providing basic skills, preparing young people for the workplace, instructing students in the workings of political institutions, and the inculcating of patriotic values clearly have permeated elementary and secondary education, to some extent, even in the absence of federal intervention. Yet, the underlying rationale of a federalism is that state and local priorities will differ from those set out at a national level. Even with considerable overlap in priorities, there will be educational needs with the seven dimensions of national interest that are not recognized or not dealt with adequately by state and local school systems.

The rationale for a federal role in education, then, is based upon the fact that the nation may place relatively different priorities on some educational issues than state and local decisionmakers, who are justifiably responding to the more parochial regional and local interests of their constituents. Unless state and local governments attach the same importance to expanding opportunities for those with special educational needs, economic growth and full employment, cultural and scientific progress, defense of the nation, an effective democracy, minimizing spillover costs, and educational research and information, there will always be a disparity between national educational goals and the decentralized educational decisions of 50 states and 15,000 local educational agencies. It is this principle that has been largely recognized in the last 30 years as the federal government has attempted to influence state and local decisionmakers to meet national concerns.

The Levers of Federal Educational Policy

Since the federal government does not sponsor or operate elementary and secondary schools, it can only influence educational policy indirectly. In general, there are four policy levers that the federal government can use to meet national educational concerns: leadership, services, grants-in-aid, and litigation.

Federal leadership involves the use of public pronouncements and media campaigns to influence the direction of states and localities through persuasion. By issuing commission reports and other pronouncements on the urgency of educational reform and the specific directions of that reform, it is expected that citizens and school authorities will be convinced of the need to adopt reforms that are in the national interest. Certainly, that appears to be the principal strategy of the National Commission on Educational Excellence.

Federal educational services include activities sponsored directly by the federal government to assist state and local entities in carrying out their missions. These include educational research, development and data reporting which serve to address national concerns and which are disseminated to educational policymakers on a national basis. For example, the National Science Foundation has invested in research and development for improving science and mathematics curricula and workshops for teacher retraining in order to improve the quality of teaching in those subjects. The National Institute of Education has sponsored an extensive program of research and development on virtually all areas of educational policy and practice. The National Center for Educational Statistics has collected a broad variety of pertinent

information on the nation's schools for national dissemination and for further analysis. Other educational services in the national interest have been provided by public television and radio and the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities.

Federal grants are designed to induce state and local educational agencies to provide services that respond to national concerns which would not be provided in the absence of the grants. For example, federal assistance for vocational education and retraining represent attempts to raise levels of economic growth and employment. Grants for providing appropriate educational services for disadvantaged, bilingual, and handicapped students reflect the national concern for expanding equality of educational opportunity. Since the federal government pays for all or a portion of the specified services, state and local education agencies have incentives to offer more of such services to meet national priorities.

Federal litigation refers to the enforcement of existing laws, and particularly Constitutional protections, as they apply to education. Although the U.S. Constitution does not make any provision for education, there are many aspects of education which are subject to other provisions of the Constitution such as the separation of church and state (First Amendment) the protection of civil rights and the guarantee of equal protection under the law (Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment). Such litigation has been especially important in the quest for desegregating schools, but it has also been a prominent part of the attempt to assure that federal grants are used for the purposes originally intended.

In fact, these four approaches should not be viewed as independent strategies. They are much more effective in achieving national objectives when they are used in concert. Federal leadership and persuasion in conjunction with federal grants, the enforcement of federal laws, and the findings of federally-sponsored research represent a most formidable arsenal for addressing any national concerns.

One of the major deficiencies of the national calls for reform is the failure to suggest ways of using the federal role to meet the national interests. Even a highly publicized national campaign for change is likely to produce a weak response by state and local school systems in the absence of financial assistance, technical assistance, and supportive legislation. The major challenge is to translate the national educational interest into a cohesive set of federal actions that will enable state and local schools to continue addressing their own needs while taking account of national concerns as well. The potential effectiveness of reforms in meeting this challenge will be seriously handicapped if the federal government does not take advantage of all at its disposal for meeting the national interest in education. ■

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